



OCEAN WATCH

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HSB

Chance visit to Maupilia worth the risk

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MY VOYAGE from French Polynesia to Australia has officially begun.

Cruisers call this westward shot across the South Pacific the coconut milk run because the sailing is downwind, the people are welcoming and the islands are beautiful.

For me, though, it's still hard. I don't feel naturally brave, and sometimes need prodding to be adventurous. But when one of my crew members, a fellow cruiser or even the author of a guide suggests I do something that seems scary to me, I'm thrown.

How do I decide what's courageous and what's reckless? Am I wisely cautious or pitifully wimpy? Is the challenge of captaining a sailboat this hard for everyone?

These are some questions I ponder as I sit at anchor in the lagoon of an atoll called Maupilia, 130 miles west of Bora Bora.

I'd been busy days earlier as we prepared to leave Raiatea, and only half listened to Steve and Scott reading aloud about Maupilia. Remote, I heard, only 10 people live there, excellent wildlife viewing. It sounded fine and off we went.

That's when I learned that sailing downwind is not so easy. When the wind is behind the boat, the sails slap and flap, forward progress becomes agonizingly slow and the boat rolls unmercifully in side-on swells. We ended up using the motor, a blessing in its way but still, hot, loud and this time smelly because it sprung a diesel leak.

It wasn't what I'd had in mind for our first passage.

When we spotted the distant palms of Maupilia, I opened the cruising guide to read about the entrance. My jaw dropped.

"Why didn't you tell me this?" I said to Steve and Scott.

"We don't have to go in," they said. "We thought we'd look at it and then decide."

Here's what the guide said: "The pass is extremely narrow and the current the swiftest we've ever seen in the Societies, up to 8 knots. To make matters worse, it's unmarked.

"The pass will appear as a very narrow opening (the French Pilot says 98 feet, but it looked less to us). Look for the disturbed water where the current exits the pass. When you are in the right position, you may take one look and change your mind about entering."

Obviously, since I'm writing from inside the lagoon, I drove through that caldron of boiling water they call a pass, but I would never have done it without Steve's urging.

We anchored, snorkeled a little and then collapsed in our bunks, exhausted from the passage.

And then the mother of all electrical storms struck. All night long. Wind, rain, lightning and thunder clobbered us, dragging our anchor and keeping us up. But we were safely inside a lagoon. Our repeated comment that whole stormy night was how lucky we were not to be out in the open ocean.

The day dawned clear, and the lagoon lived up to its billing: abundant seabirds, friendly locals, great beachcombing and good snorkeling.

I'm glad I drove the boat into Maupilia Atoll. It gave me confidence and made this leg more of what I wanted it to be.

Still, for me such decisions will never be easy. Nor are they ever over. Now, I have to drive the boat out.

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